THE TIMES

SE News

HD **The great meat debate: is it still OK to eat steak?**

BY Harry Wallop
WC 1,491 words
PD 21 October 2021
SN The Times
SC T
ED 1; National
PG 4,5
LA English

CY © Times Newspapers Limited 2021

LP

The latest buzzword in agriculture is 'regenerative farming', in which grazing cows help to put nutrients back into the soil. Harry Wallop meets the farmers who say that eating meat can be sustainable

We all know by now that eating meat contributes to climate change. Greenpeace has declared that, in the UK, "we need to be eating 70 per cent less meat and dairy by 2030 to prevent climate breakdown". It's not just the vast amounts of methane belched out by cows and sheep that are so catastrophic for global warming, it's also the ripping up of rainforests to grow industrial animal feed for pigs and chickens.

TD

So is it really that simple: meat bad, veg good? No, an increasing number of agriculture experts say.

"It is beautifully complicated, a bit like our digestive system," says Patrick Holden, one of the pioneers of organic farming in the UK. He heads the Sustainable Food Trust, which says it is possible to eat dairy and meat without destroying the planet. "It's a ridiculously binary debate to say, 'Give up livestock, eat plants.' Not all livestock are the same. It's like saying palm oil and genetically modified soy is the same as an organic carrot. The whole thing is ludicrous."

Before we discuss why Holden may be on to something, it's important to look at the raw data to understand why so many people think throwing a steak on a barbecue is now a form of eco-terrorism.

According to an Oxford study led by the environment and agriculture researcher Joseph Poore, 1kg of beef is responsible for 60kg of CO2 equivalent emissions. The next worst is lamb or mutton, at 25kg. In comparison, bananas and peas produce 0.8kg of CO2 emissions and onions a mere 0.3kg. It looks pretty stark.

Oxford calculates its figures looking at not just the methane emitted by the animal, but at transport of the produce to a supermarket, the packaging and the farming process, the tractors used, the fertiliser, animal feed and, crucially, something called "land use change".

This is the lost opportunity of the land being used to farm animals rather than being returned to nature.

The problem with any study like this, however, is that livestock are farmed radically differently around the world. Martin Williams is the chief executive of Gaucho Restaurants, a chain of upmarket Argentine steak restaurants, which, ambitiously, aims to offer carbonneutral beef on all its menus by next year. Some of this neutrality will come from offsetting beef emissions by planting trees. But some will come from ensuring its beef comes from farms with a lower carbon footprint.

"Beef has been getting all the bad rep, and much of it is undeserved," he says. Well, he would. But he argues that high-quality cattle grazing on the pampas grass of Argentina and eating no animal feed emit considerably less CO2 than one reared on a typical farm in the US. He points to a United Nations report that calculates that 1kg of steak from south Asian grain-fed cattle produces five times the amount of that from European grass-fed cattle.

"A cow, intensively reared on an indoor feedlot, eating grain, will be burping and farting a lot," Williams says. "Our cattle each have the equivalent of four acres to walk around. Their methane output is much less because they are eating slowly, because they are eating grass, because their manure becomes a fertiliser ? this is positive carbon sequestration."

This is the key argument made by Holden and those who champion "regenerative farming", a return to oldfashioned methods including crop rotation and mixed farming. One of its central planks is that you should axe artificial fertiliser and use animal manure instead. The upside is that the manure "sequesters", or stores, much of the animal's carbon output back into the soil.

Ben Taylor-Davies farms 500 acres in Ross-on-Wye in Herefordshire, including 35 head of cattle, 100 sheep and 100 egg-laying hens. "My meat is the byproduct of my soil getting healthier," he says. "The only way my soils are getting healthier is that carbon is being stored in them, and the only way I can store that carbon is to get the animals to do it."

His fields are rotated so that when they are not growing crops for human consumption they are growing cover crops, such as crimson clover, quinoa, sunflower, linseed or stubble radish. These are eaten by his sheep and cattle, which turn it into manure, which then enhances the soil health.

Taylor-Davies agrees that we should all eat less but better-quality meat. The problem for UK consumers, however, is that regeneratively grown beef or lamb is hard to find in supermarkets. Your best bet is to look out for the label "grass-fed". But, as Glen Burrows, a co-founder of the Ethical Butcher, says: "There is a huge loophole with [official] food labelling, whereby any meat can be labelled as grass-fed if its diet was predominantly grass. So you can have grain-finished beef that can legally be labelled as grass-fed. What you need to look for is '100 per cent grass-fed' ? that's the next best thing to meat that has been regeneratively reared."

Those who are unwilling to accept that beef or sheep farmed regeneratively can be significantly less damaging to the environment than the Oxford study suggests should aim for poultry. "The meat with the lowest carbon footprint is chicken and turkey," says Jessica Wragg, a butcher and the author of Girl on the Block. The Oxford study says 1kg of chicken produces 6.1kg of emissions. "You can produce a lot of chicken using relatively little input," Wragg adds.

Environmentalists argue that 70 per cent of the soy being grown in the world ? much of it on deforested land ? ends up as animal feed, including for British chickens. Wragg points out that soy-free chickens are available, including slow-grown birds farmed by Fosse Meadows, in quite a few butchers and meat delivery boxes. The supermarket Iceland has promised that it will start selling soy-free chicken in the next few months.

Pork has a slightly higher carbon footprint than poultry (7.2kg of CO2 per kg of meat). "I'd always aim for freerange pork," Wragg says, adding that

Landrace and Duroc breeds produce more protein for their footprint. The best meat of all in terms of sustainability is wild game. Not pheasant, which has invariably been bred to be shot using lead pellets, but wild venison, rabbit, hare, pigeon or even grey squirrel. Any methane wild game produces would have been emitted anyway. "I think game is phenomenal. It is the one true way of eating and sourcing responsibly," Wragg says.

There may have been uproar when the police shot dead a white stag in Liverpool last month, but as long as it was turned into tasty burgers or stew, it was at least great for the environment.

Why we should all be cooking venison

It's not often that health and environmental concerns dovetail so neatly, but for a meat-eater wild venison is a win-win. Not only is its meat high in protein, low in saturated fat and with less cholesterol even than turkey, but the wild deer population in this country is estimated to be greater than at any stage since Roman times. The chef and venison advocate Mike Robinson, who sells wild meat via deerbox.co.uk, says culling keeps herds healthy and prevents them damaging woodland. "You can't ethically or morally pull the trigger unless you have a market for it," he adds.

People often think of venison as a dark, strong meat, but in reality it is more mild-flavoured. You can cook it as you would lamb or beef. Venison mince, for example, makes a good bolognese or lasagne. Because venison is so lean, you have to be careful it doesn't dry out or toughen. That means cooking it hard and fast and serving it pink, or long and slow in a casserole to keep it moist.

Chops can be pan-fried in butter and oil with rosemary or thyme and whole cloves of garlic for a couple of minutes on each side. Try marinating steaks or a butterflied haunch in olive oil, lemon, garlic, oregano and rosemary, then searing in butter on all sides and finishing in a 200C oven ? a minute or two for the steaks, 25 for the haunch.

Neck, shank and shoulder can be seared with chopped onions, carrots, celery, black pepper and maybe some juniper berries, then covered in red wine and gently simmered. For a richer sauce, drain off the liquid and reduce it, then add a few knobs of butter.

Tony Turnbull, Food Editor

IN i0 : Agriculture

NS genv : Natural Environment | reqraf : Suggested Reading Agriculture/Forestry | gcat : Political/General News | redit : Selection of Top Stories/Trends/Analysis | reqr : Suggested Reading Industry News

RE uk : United Kingdom | eurz : Europe | weurz : Western Europe

PUB News UK & Ireland Limited

AN Document T000000020211021ehal00057

Search Summary

Text	"Before we discuss why Holden may be on to something, it's important to look at the raw data to understand why so many people think throwing a steak on a barbecue is now a form of eco-terrorism ."
Date	All Dates
Source	All Sources
Author	All Authors
Company	All Companies
Subject	All Subjects
Industry	All Industries
Region	All Regions
Language	English
Results Found	1
Timestamp	17 May 2023 9:09 AM